

Panhandle Health District

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Wash Well for Lasting Summer Fun

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Cruising down water slides and splashing in cool pools are ideal ways to beat summer heat and pick up unwelcome guests in your intestine if you're not careful. Microscopic parasites introduced to the water by swimmers and, in lakes and rivers, by animals can leave you with stomach cramps and diarrhea one to 12 days after that fun-filled afternoon in the water.

That unwelcome parasite is cryptosporidium and it causes an intestinal earthquake called cryptosporidiosis, wisely nicknamed crypto, which can last up to two weeks.

"Do your part—don't swim when you're sick," says Dave Hylsky, Panhandle Health District epidemiologist. "Shower real well before you swim and try to avoid swallowing water."

Crypto travels with people into recreational waters as naturally as the sunscreen on their arms and legs. Chlorine kills most germs before they can cause problems. But crypto can survive nearly 11 days in chlorinated water, and that endurance creates trouble.

Ultraviolet light has proven effective at killing crypto, but its cost is more than many splash parks can bear. The new Silver Rapids Indoor Waterpark at Silver Mountain Resort in Kellogg uses ultraviolet light to fight contamination.

Last year, Idaho had at least 517 cases of crypto statewide compared to 40 cases in 2006 and 15 in 2005. So far this year, about 10 cases have been identified in the five northern counties. The parasite's growing prevalence has led doctors to test more often for it, which contributes to the higher numbers.

Crypto lives in the intestines of infected people and animals. It creeps into the water through feces carried in diapers, stuck to clothing or the body or involuntarily (or voluntarily) released. People carry it into the water on their feet after they've walked on soil or other surfaces that have been contaminated with feces.

People become infected when they swallow water contaminated with crypto or touch their mouths with contaminated hands. They pick it up when they eat uncooked food washed in crypto-contaminated water.

"Wash your hands well after swimming and before you eat," Hylsky says. "It's pretty easy to open that bag of chips after getting out of the water and your hands carry whatever was in the water right to your mouth."

The most common symptom of cryptosporidiosis is watery diarrhea. Infection with the parasite also brings stomach cramps or pain, dehydration, nausea, vomiting, fever and weight loss.

Most healthy people recover without treatment. Diarrhea can lead to dehydration so drinking plenty of fluids is important. Fluid replacement therapy options are available for infants, for whom dehydration can be life-threatening. Prescription medication is available for severe cases.

Crypto spreads quickly. People with contaminated hands spread the parasite to the food they prepare and serve to themselves and others. Crypto stays in intestines for at least two weeks after symptoms end. People with diarrhea should stay out of recreational waters while they have symptoms and for at least two weeks after the symptoms end.

To prevent contamination with crypto and other parasites, people should avoid swallowing water in pools, lakes and rivers. Showering thoroughly with soap before entering public waters should remove contaminants sticking to the body. Diaper changes belong in a bathroom and parents should wash hands immediately after.

Regular bathroom breaks and/or diaper changes are important for young children swimming in recreational waters. Finally, washing hands well with soap after swimming and using the toilet and before preparing and eating food helps prevent the spread of crypto and so many other germs that dampen summer fun.